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## The inherent politics of quality in public park management

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**Title**

The inherent politics of quality in public park management

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**Short abstract**

In this paper, we highlight and illustrate the inherent politics embedded in “quality” as a concept for managing public parks. Reflecting more generic quality concepts, contemporary quality models in park management include concepts for both operational, strategic and stakeholder management as well managing the park organisation itself. However, quality concepts and their application through various management models include as well as exclude the access, values and worldviews of particular interests. In this way, any particular quality concept and model embeds its own politics by inherent allocations of ‘who gets what, when and how’. We illustrate the inherent politics by providing a case study of a widely adopted quality model for operational management that has been adopted and implemented in Denmark as part of new public management reforms. In perspective, other quality concepts and models can be called upon that offer alternative politics for managing public parks.

## Paper

### Quality models in public park management

Quality has been a central concern for centuries within commerce and private firms in terms of trade, strategy, sales, marketing, and manufacturing. Since the 1980s the concept of quality has been transferred from management in the private sector to the public sector. Public sectors have witnessed a significant reorientation in their management of service design, processes, relations, and outputs through implementation of various quality models and techniques (Milakovich, 1990; Vinni, 2007; Holzer *et al.*, 2009).

The reorientation can also be observed in the planning and management of public parks and open space in urban settings. Earlier as in the case of UK for example, green space management practice has been criticized for emphasizing provision of quantities and a failure to address the issue of providing quality (Pauleit *et al.*, 2003, p. 159). However, today it is possible to list a number of different quality models, tools and concepts applied in planning and management of public parks. A non-exclusive list could include: the English based Green Flag Award (GFA) Scheme for promotion of park management of high quality (CABE Space, 2004); the English based SpaceShaper consultation and evaluation methodology that promotes stakeholder assessments of parks and open spaces (CABE Space, 2007); the European award program for towns and cities that promote greening in towns and cities 'Entente Florale' (Entente Florale Europe, 2011); the International program for benchmarking of park organizations 'Parkcheck' (Yardstick, 2011); the Danish 'quality specification for green space maintenance' that targets maintenance and management needs (Juul *et al.*, 1998); the international competition for liveable cities, LivCom (LivCom Awards, 2011); the Swedish planning tool for 'sociotope mapping' that identifies the social quality of open spaces by mapping important social uses (Ståhle, 2005; 2006); 'experience mapping' that identifies recreational quality by mapping recreational experiences at various spatial levels (Caspersen & Olafsson, 2010; Lindholst *et al.*, 2012), and numerous ad hoc definitions and approaches used in landscape architectural competitions. New models for management and recognition of quality are also being developed as in the case of the Nordic green space award project (Green Space Award, 2012).

Today, public park planners and managers in urban settings have to deal with and respond to demands for 'quality' – whether this is implicitly or explicitly embedded in formal policies, managerial and organizational requirements, stakeholder demands, institutional expectations, and/or planning needs and practices. However, the use of quality as a concept for public park management is not without trouble.

### **Quality in double-trouble**

The concept of 'quality', epistemologically once understood as evaluation of the transcendent properties of an object, has since the Enlightenment shifted from a private matter of subjective judgment to become a publicly omnipresent, and carefully managed and organized activity in society (Dahler-Larsen, 2008, pp. 9-12). Today, quality has become a rich concept with competing interpretations, usages and multiple layers of meaning (Dahler-Larsen, 2011, p. 138). According to Dahler-Larsen (2008), the concept of quality is what Gallie (1998) calls an 'essentially contested concept', i.e. its use involves endless disputes about its application and implementation.

In their search for a global conceptual definition of quality Reeves and Bednar (1994) suggest that there are different definitions of quality that are appropriate under different conditions and that adherence to one definition over another implies both advantages and disadvantages. Reeves and Bednar (ibid.) identify at least four roots of quality definitions with general relevance for products and services. The four roots are: *excellence*, *value*, *conformance to specifications*, and as *meeting/exceeding expectations*. The four roots represent a historical chronology in applied quality concepts, but today, different managerial and organisational approaches toward quality co-opt and incorporate (or go beyond) the four roots in various degrees. Congruently, Dahler-Larsen (2008, 2011) describes a cross-cutting *organisational perspective* on quality (2008; 2011). This perspective is about how organizations take on specialized and overarching functions for integrating quality in various organisational operations. Quality is not only about goods and services, but also about the quality of organisation itself. In this 'reflexive' mode, quality becomes an abstract concept for critique, reflections, and reform without retaining any certain definition in terms of its content. It opens up for mixing various definitions and criteria to serve different needs and interests. The open definition of quality in an organizational perspective also contains inherent paradoxes because any operational concept of quality must gain and preserve support against other possible concepts. Any particular operationalization of quality in an organisation is likely to be temporary (Dahler-Larsen 2011, p. 138-141).

In public park management, implicit and explicit criteria for quality may for example vary between the trained professional officer and other stakeholders such as politicians or citizens thereby complicating provision of services. The application of quality perspectives, particularly between competing stakeholders in planning and management of public parks can therefore take up considerable time and generate endless disputes. A diversity of stakeholders including politicians, managers, experts, organizations, tourists, users and interest groups or the public opinion may have a say about which qualities that should be promoted or can be resourced in public parks. The difficult part is to decide upon *which*

qualities matter, and which should be promoted and can be afforded. This raises the issue of, which qualities jointly constitute the ‘good’ public park within its particular context. Some user groups or professionals may prefer wilderness and nature-like environments; other user groups or professionals may have preferences for more social and playful park characteristics, while yet other interest groups may be more focused on biodiversity and nature protection than leisure and recreation. It follows that specific properties are not evaluated normatively in the same way by all and a specific judgment of a public park’s qualities is therefore inherently relative.

Adoption of mutually recognized quality standards, concepts and models for planning and management of public parks may be one way of addressing the inherent relativism that quality issues and concerns constitute for planning and management. Through consensus building, stakeholder deliberation, and agreements disputes can be settled (at least temporarily and/or locally) in various models, standards and concepts. Within the practice of planning and management of public parks it is possible to find several such ‘agreements’ that have gained influence and widespread application through political and institutional support, usefulness for handling managerial challenges, or alignment with particular organizational or professional needs and interests.

However, as already indicated by the diversity of competing stakeholder interests that may have a say about quality, virtual all conceptualizations of quality within a public context are partial, are based on particular assumptions and promote some interests on behalf of other interests. They imply certain ‘worldviews’ or ‘Weltanschauung’ (Freeman, 1984, p. 29) that cannot be united by reasoning based on mere logic. Quality models applied by public park planners and managers are not free of bias or impartiality in the sense that they are professionally virtuous solutions to problems born out of the inherent relativism. They are likely to be imbued with the remnants of the professionals’ education and training and their evolved views as to how best to achieve quality landscapes and to involve also ‘agency’ motivations. The application of any particular quality model will necessarily include, favour, and constitute certain world-views and interests as well as exclude, disfavour, deny and dislocate other – this despite the normative and discursive framing in contemporary society of quality as an universally positive attribute (Dahler-Larsen, 2011). In this perspective decisions about quality in a public context are inherently political; this implies – in the words of Lasswell (1936), allocations of ‘who gets what, when and how’.

Seen from critical perspective, that acknowledge the potential ‘double-trouble’ born out of conceptual and political controversies, applied quality models should therefore not (only) be evaluated by their immediate appearance and face-value, but need to be critically scrutinized in order to make their inherent assumptions, applications, choices, biases and particularities transparent for various decision-

makers and interests in the public realm. In order to investigate further inherent politics of quality applied within planning and management of public parks we provide an illustrative case study that highlight how the inherent politics may manifest. The case is selected to provide insight on our theme based on a widely applied and influential quality concept and model within planning and management of public parks.

#### *Six analytical questions*

For analytical purposes, Dahler-Larsen (2008, p. 107-8) raises a handful of critical questions for investigation of any particular quality perspective at the conceptual level. The inherent politics in the concept of quality also requires a critical perspective that addresses the issue of the allocative effects, this is, who gets what and how (Lasswell, 1936). In an applied perspective it is equally important to see how quality is transformed and implemented in practice and see what outcomes this bring about. For our purpose, six cross-cutting questions that highlight the conceptual and political implications can be formulated and amended as following:

- What kind of problems and challenges are to be handled by a quality perspective (justification)?
- What are the concept and criteria used to define quality (quality concept/criteria)?
- What are the procedures for operationalization and methods, e.g. data collection, scoring (operationalization)?
- What are the instrumental, cognitive and normative requirements for the application of a particular quality concept (requirements)?
- How is a quality concept applied and how does the application work in practice (implementation)?
- What issues and interests are included and excluded by a particular quality definition and its implementation (allocation)?

The six questions structure our case analysis that both covers and goes beyond instrumental evaluations and addresses the deeper conceptual and political issues that arise by particular applications of quality concepts and models.

#### **A case study of an applied quality concept**

Most Danish municipalities have organised their operational management of parks with outset in a system for specification of 'quality' developed in the late 1990s. The system is formally labelled 'quality specification for green space maintenance' (Juul *et al.*, 1998) and contains a complete system for managing elements of a park and their proper maintenance. The system is similar to so-

called ‘ground maintenance’ specifications and programmes of work that was developed in the age of Compulsory Competitive Tendering in the 80s and 90s in England. The term ‘grounds maintenance’ denotes a rather static and cost focused approach compared to the term ‘landscape maintenance’ (Lindholst & Sullivan, 2009).

The *justification* of the system is based on its intent to tackle several managerial needs. These include provision of a rational basis for decisions about service levels, efficient planning and execution of maintenance works, and a framework for effective price competitions and management by contract. The purpose of the quality specification is here congenial with the requirement and content of new public management reforms (Hood, 1991). It’s methodology is also central in standard approaches for contracting out grounds maintenance works in many OECD countries (Lindholst, 2009).

**Figure 1**

<b>Element group (Grass)</b>		<i>Reference photo</i>
<b>Element name (amenity grass)</b> Purpose and function (for landscape and use). <i>E.g. Amenity grass are found in gardens, parks and residential areas and can be used to stay, play and ball games Amenity grass typically have high durability and use.</i>		
<b>Description (horticultural definition of element)</b> <i>E.g. Amenity grass is uniform in their expression and is clearly delineated for other elements. There is only little and dispersed weeds. The grass forms a continuous surface which is predominantly green. The grass appears fairly regularly.</i>		
<b>WORK STANDARD</b> Measureable and clear specification that the element/work must comply with.		
<b>Global</b>		<b>Local</b>
<b>Performance</b> <i>Grass height is from 4 cm to max (8-10) cm.  Around furniture and solid elements grass height is max.15 cm.  Grass clippings shall nowhere appear more than a clump of 10 x10 cm per m2.</i>		<i>E.g. grass height: 8–12 cm.</i>
<b>Instruction</b> <i>Waste collections of fallout lethargic, branches and the like are removed before mowing and fixed a time after leaf fall in November/December and one time in March/April  Spring Preparation before starting mowing with removal of fallen branches, molehills and other</i>		<i>E.g. yearly: even application of 100 kg NPK per 10.000 m<sup>2</sup>.</i>
<b>Additional (ordered additionally)</b> <i>Fertilization (0-3) time (s) referred to manure plan  Vertical Cutting annually with collection</i>		<i>E.g. topdressing of 10.000 m<sup>2</sup>.</i>

Example: a revised format for quality specification of individual park elements based on the Danish quality specification for green space maintenance (Juul *et al.* 1998).

The embedded quality *concept and supporting criteria* is here firmly rooted in what Reeves and Bednar identify as the conformance to specification” root of quality (1994, p. 421-3), where quality is conceptualized as a set of parameters that define the required quality of an object. In the case of the quality specification this is achieved through quantifiable parameters for functionality of elements, as well as performance and instruction based specifications for work routines. An example of a revised version of the quality specification’s format is given in **Figure 1**. The original format included more parameters such as: purpose and desired state of elements, content of work, frequency of work, threshold levels for acceptable standards and deviations. Parameters are furthermore specified for various elements in the park such as various grass types, hedges, trees, shrubs or flower beds.

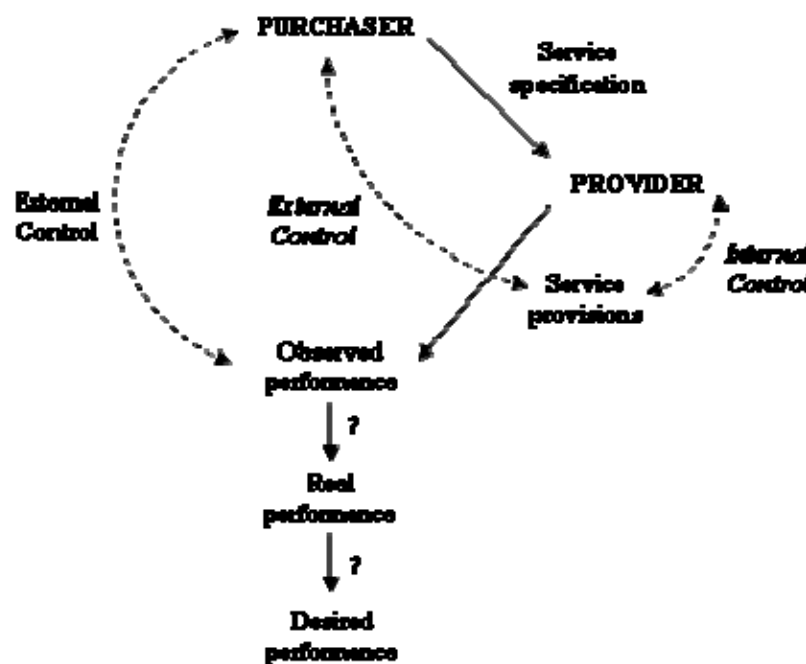
More generally, the quality root conformance to specifications (Reeves and Bednar, 1994, p. 421-3) is about stating quantitative measurements against pre-defined standards for some desired characteristics of a product. Measurement of quality and quality improvements by adopting a conformance method is relatively straightforward and should, in principle, lead to increased internal efficiency. It also provides the consistency needed in longer supply chains. Managers can also break-down customer needs into specified standards that are required to be met by a particular product and/or service. However, this mainly works out when attributes are tangible and preferences are governed by clear and specific standards. However, the performance of public services is typically evaluated subjectively by most citizens/customers and conformance of tangible attributes is only one aspect of the overall evaluation. Organisational wise, supporting systems and structures for standardisation may produce an inflexible and rigid organisation that has difficulties in responding to changes in vital external circumstances (e.g. citizen/customer preferences).

In its *operationalization*, the system assumes that two separated organisational parts operate the system. A provider carries out grounds maintenance work conforming to specified standards while a purchaser is left with the task to monitor work and eventually revising the specification. Required work are ideally carried out according to work plans (service specifications) in order to keep elements within acceptable quality parameters. Monitoring, or ‘quality control’, is carried out by spot and/or joint inspections either prescheduled or by random. Inspections use visual and physical measurements with various measurement instruments as supports. Monitoring is pervasive and critical in the management of quality based on the quality specification. **Figure 2** illustrates three levels of monitoring/control embedded in the organisational setup assumed by the quality specification.



The implicit *requirements* for the system to function are based on needs for horticultural knowledge and operational expertise on grounds maintenance, internal or external organisational disaggregation into purchaser-provider relations, continuously updated data-registrations of quantities of elements combined with a sufficient organisational capacity for monitoring/controlling service provisions (Lindholst & Bogetoft, 2011).

Figure 2



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Monitoring (control) instruments in the standard approach includes the purchaser's control of the observed performance as well as the internal and external controls of service performance and provisions. The approach includes no direct link to real and desired performance, for example as experienced by visitors. Source: Lindholst (2008b, p. 44).

*Allocation:* Management based on the quality specification basically implies a static, atomistic and preserving focus on an entity that can be argued to be holistic, dynamic and evolutionary in its nature. Natural growth cycles are hard to manage effective through the system. The system conceptualizes the park as a subset of separate constituents (elements) and the quality of the park is discursively defined accordingly. The overall impression and broader recreational and social quality are not specified or formally taken into account within the operation of the system. The standard implies a strong focus on the operational side of park

management as a set of predefined maintenance tasks. In the system, a high service standard becomes a high horticultural standard.

The system has had widespread constitutive effects on park management practices in Denmark. Since its birth in the late 1990s, the system has been *implemented* through locally adapted versions by local park authorities across Denmark. The continued reference to and adoption of the system has transformed the system into what can be called the ‘unofficial’ national standard. The quality specification has together with implementation of the organisational requirements also been highly successful in improving technical efficiency, however not necessarily effectiveness. Efficiency gains up to 30% has been reported in the case of maintenance in a number of well-managed historical parks in Denmark (Lindholst, 2008). However, in UK for example, the cost oriented focus on maintenance work as an activity that simply keeps green spaces clean and tidy has been criticised as a ‘waste of money’, that could have been spent more effectively to increase usability and ecological value (Beer *et al.*, 2003). Other broader constitutive consequences of the adoption of the quality specification for managing maintenance could potentially include increased bureaucratization and administrative costs as well as a changed cultural and behavioural outlook (Dahler-Larsen 2011, p. 204).

In a critical perspective, the focus on maintenance and horticultural standards may be viewed as ‘the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B’ (Kerr, 1995) which details the way in which rewarding, in this paper’s context, landscape maintenance standards, is undertaken whilst hope is raised for outcomes that provide social and societal health and well-being benefits. As indicated in **Figure 2**, the methodology embedded in the quality specification is here ‘blind’ toward the ‘real’ and ‘desired’ performance defined by different stakeholders.

### **Conclusions and perspectives**

Our case study has highlighted several inherent political implications related to who get what, when and how. Firstly, the quality specification is embedded in a highly expert based discourse which mastery requires a high level of horticultural and professional expertise. Other major stakeholder groups, such as politicians and various users are excluded from participating in the discourse on an equal footing. Secondly, the quality specification promotes a set of horticultural and expert based values that focuses and defines how quality is conceptualized and addressed in decision-making processes.

With other existing quality concepts and models within public park management in mind, such as those embedded in sociotope or recreational experience mapping, it becomes clear that the quality specification only to a lesser extent is linked with service attributes (for example health, social or recreational qualities) that have relevance for politicians and citizens. It follows that adoption

of alternative quality concepts within public park management may address and mitigate the weaknesses and biases in of the particular politics of the quality specification. It also follows that such adoption would create new kind of politics.

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